

Emmett Till in Different States: Poems: An Interview with Philip C. Kolin

by John Zheng

I conducted the following interview in the late summer of 2016 with Philip C. Kolin on the publication of his Emmett Till in Different States: Poems. Kolin's collection commemorates the 60th anniversary of Till's death. Published by Third World Press, the oldest independent publisher of black thought and literature in America, Kolin's book can claim the honor of being the first full-length collection of poems on Till's life and legacy. Commenting on Kolin's book, Natasha Trethewey declared, "The murder of Emmett Till . . . belongs to all of us and should be sung by many different voices. In Emmett Till in Different States, Philip Kolin adds his voice—a necessary retelling so that we might be transformed by the listening." Another distinguished African American poet, Sterling Plumpp, claimed that "Kolin encapsulates the Till saga between memory of slavery and the horrible events taking place today with young black men" and praises Kolin for "superb poetic artistry in inventing persons who speak in a character and tone that are believable and moving." Kolin is the University Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus in the College of Arts and Letters at the University of Southern Mississippi where he also edits the Southern Quarterly. Emmett Till in Different States is his seventh collection of poems.

JZ: You are widely respected as a Shakespearean and Tennessee Williams scholar. Why did you write a book of poems on Emmett Till?

PCK: There are a lot of reasons. One has to do with geography. Like Emmett, I was born in Chicago and lived on the South Side. In fact, at one point I lived just a few blocks from Emmett's



grandmother, Alma Sparkman. Emmett's mother Mamie and I have the same alma mater—Chicago Teachers College, South (now Chicago State University)—though she graduated three years before I started. I also knew many of the places Emmett might have visited in the city, and I often wondered if I ever passed him on a street or ridden on a bus or an L train with him. (Incidentally, I wrote a surrealistic one-act play—"Emmett Till Goes Skip-Stopping on the CTA," published in *Callaloo*—about Emmett fantasizing doing heroic deeds while riding downtown in Chicago on the L.) Almost serendipitously, Third World Press is located close to where Mamie and Emmett lived over sixty years ago when he was murdered. In addition to having Chicago roots, I've traveled extensively in the Mississippi Delta, doing research on Tennessee Williams, where Emmett's family came from, and I knew the small towns that figure prominently in his tragedy and that

are cited in the poems.

Another reason for my interest in Emmett Till and Mamie is that I had taught and published several books on modern and contemporary African American playwrights who alluded to his savage murder. One of the plays was Adrienne Kennedy's *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* (1996) that takes audiences into a mother's nightmare after her son is brutalized by a white policeman who stops him for a burned-out tail-light. A play for our decade as well, *Sleep Deprivation Chamber* confronts the chilling horrors of racial profiling and prejudice.

Ultimately, though, I wrote the poems to honor Mamie Till for her heroic and historic actions, and even dedicated the collection to her. She deserves the title of "Mother of the Civil Rights Movement" not only for fighting for justice for her son, showing his mangled body in an open casket to the world, but also for perpetuating his memory and promoting Civil Rights over many decades.

JZ: In what ways does Marilyn Nelson's *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005) compare with your collection? Do you see her work as a breakthrough, a challenge, a key influence?

PCK: Many important poets around the world have written about Emmett Till—Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, Wanda Coleman, Sonia Sanchez, Cornelius Eady, Nicolás Guillén, and even José Craveirinha in Mozambique, but for the most part only in a single or a couple of poems, though Sam Cornish has written more extensively about Till and Jake Adam York published a nine sonnet sequence entitled "Substantiation" about Till's murder. But Nelson's *Wreath* is a much more ambitious work, a heroic crown of 15 linked sonnets, doubtless the most sophisticatedly textured collection of poems on Till thus far, though I still find it implausible that she conceived it as a children's book. Heavily indebted to Shakespeare, whose language Nelson echoes and profits from, *Wreath* is for me the most important group of poems to have

been written on Till.

But the tenor, language, scope, and purpose of *Emmett Till in Different States* radically differ from Nelson's *Wreath*. While she concentrates exclusively on Till's murder, his "victimhood" (and I focus on that, too, of course), I extend the timeline from the 1950s to the present to honor Till's legacy as a Civil Rights martyr as well as his role as a heroic commentator on subsequent acts of racial violence; for example, the murders of Dr. King, Medgar Evers, Virgil Ware, Trayvon Martin, the horrors of the Freedom Riders, black soldiers' pain in Vietnam, and the slaughter of black children across America. As a witness to these events, Till engages us through indictments, his excoriating wit, and his pulsating prophecies. Helping readers understand the history behind these events, I include a chronology and ten pages of notes identifying key places, people, and dates. In fact, I envisioned the collection as a chronicle of Civil Rights violations as seen through Emmett's, and Mamie's, eyes. Many of my poems turn to individuals and events not included in Nelson. But one line in *Wreath* hints at what I have tried to do: "Let America remember what he taught." I hope my poems help readers understand those things about Civil Rights witnessed from Emmett's perspective that America needs to learn and remember, what Jerry Ward has called "abrasive remembering," the "obligation of reckoning."

JZ: What do you think of Devery Anderson's *Emmett Till: The Murder that Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement*?

PCK: It is a masterpiece of scholarship, the essential biography of Emmett Till studied against the Civil Rights Movement. I recently reviewed it for *African American Review* and said so. How providential that Devery's 10-year long project was published within months of my Till poems. I wish I could have read it when I was writing them. No one knows more about Emmett Till than Devery. Always the impecca-

ble historian, he includes 102 pages of documentation containing over 1600 notes. Though rooted in actual events and places, the poems in *Emmett Till in Different States* strive to tell the interior history of Emmett, Mamie, and many others caught in the whirlwind of this tragedy. The poems take readers into the liminal world between action and consequence, then and now, reality and transcendence.

JZ: Tell us why you titled your book *Emmett Till in Different States*.

PCK: It invites readers to see the multiple states through which the poems evolve—geographic, temporal, racial/gender, theological, and even narrative. Geography, whether literal or symbolic, plays an inexorable role in Till's tragedy. Traveling from Chicago to Mississippi in 1955, even though he had relatives in Leflore County, he was demonized as an outsider, an agitator who disrupted the peace of the State of Mississippi. Capturing both literal and symbolic geography, Denise Billups's powerful cover image presents Emmett's photo against a backdrop of a map with state lines running north and south across his face almost like lacerations, what might be termed national wounds. The title also points to major differences in states of life—Emmett as a hunted black boy in the Jim Crow South; Carolyn Bryant, a hallowed representative of white Southern feminine purity Till was accused of despoiling. The word *states* also resonates with Emmett's transformation in the poem from being a vibrant young man commenting on his family, his life in 1955 Chicago, playing games, seeing girls, etc. to becoming a choric voice from the grave, a truth-telling ghost, transcending time to indict and mourn racial horrors. But as Emmett passes through these different states, I see him move toward canonization, the subject of the last poem in the collection. Here are the first two stanzas:

You led a life of heroic virtue
never renouncing the covenant of your skin
even under torture or water.

In Mississippi, apart from the natural
order, they filled you with gashes and
holes—
you wore a Pentateuch of wounds.

The poems also focus on what Chris Metress has called different “states of telling”—recounting, accusing, memorializing, etc. In “Emmett Weeps over Chicago,” for instance, he grieves over the loss of Chicago's children from racial violence today. When the infamous Tallahatchie County jury recounts their view of the trial, their claims to truthfulness are undercut by the “not guilty” verdict they handed to Roy Bryant and J. C. Milam. Even more blatantly, “The Judgment of Carolyn Bryant” records the “judgment” against her bigoted account of what she said happened, but in “Emmett's Sister” or “Mamie Till's Triolet,” we hear starkly eloquent memorials, solemn, almost Psalm-like strains. The “Triolet” even suggests the call and response pattern which is a hallmark of African American literature.

JZ: Your last remark raises a key point about your book. One of its most memorable accomplishments is the voices we hear. Whose are they and how did you discover them?

PCK: Yes, *Emmett Till in Different States* is a book of voices; in fact, I thought of titling it *Emmett Till in Different Voices*. These voices emerge from a variety of traditions—blues, spirituals, the Bible, classical mythology, Magic Realism. Most of them inevitably belong to Emmett and Mamie; I say their “voices” because the poems present various sides of Emmett and his mother. As narrator, Emmett voices the different moods he experiences as we see him go through a process of painful maturation. Likewise, Mamie's voices include those of a loving, compassionate mother, a vitriolic champion of Civil Rights, a prophetic counselor to young black men, etc. Other historical voices belong to Mahalia Jackson, who bought Till's headstone, Till's Great Uncle Moses, Dr. King, etc.

I also invented characters whose voices help readers probe even deeper into Emmett's and Mamie's tragedy—an old black woman, Aunt Aretha, whom Emmett meets in the Delta and who asks him “*How long have you been a Negro?*”; Emmett's fictional sister who declares “The sun canters for your smile”; his “brothers” or other lynched black men whose corpses lie “graveless”; a black man celebrating Emmett's 75th birthday; and even the Chicago River that orchestrates its grief in a jazz funeral welcoming a native son home. Each of these voices blends the elegiac with history. Then there are the spiteful and sinful voices of the jury or Carolyn Bryant. However, aside from some disdainful epithets, I could not bring myself to write poems in the voices of Emmett's killers. No matter who speaks, though, I wanted the voice to have historical credibility.

JZ: Some of your poems are ekphrastic (“The Fedora” or “The *Jet* Photo”). Here is “The Fedora” in full:

There he was, young Emmett Till,
larger than life under that wide
brimmed fedora, dressed like a man

waiting for the world to wink back.
That hat changed him from some stuttering
Bobo
to the Prince of the South Side

as he sat there on a darkened throne
in Mamie's photography studio
with its gunpowder clouds.

Cocky, tilted back, the fedora
made him look snappy, hep, brown
sugar cool with all the women.

He could have taught Michael Jackson
how to moonwalk the ladies
on his own bad victory tour.

He bought it for the price of a dream,
the grosgrain band and shady brim
circling clear around the world,

this jazzy black Indiana Jones
starring in his own *Temple of Doom*.
They say a black man in a fedora

gets special notice in a white world.
Like Dr. Martin Luther King
sporting one, he could count on being
called

“Sir” by moneyed gentlemen on the Pull-
mans,
With old colored porters tipping
Their caps to him.

Why didn't he pack it for his trip south?

How do poems like these fit into the overall plan of your collection?

PCK: Emmett Till's tragedy was one of the most publicized and photographed crimes in the history of racial trauma in America. The poem on the *Jet* photo may be the centerpiece for the collection. Deciding to have her son waked in an open coffin, Mamie Till revealed to the world the horror that Mississippi had done. It is an iconic photo that has terrorized anyone who has seen it, but especially African American men, as Harvey Young has shown, down the decades. In this age of “Black Lives Matter,” the photo assumes special importance, I think, as a warning about institutionalized violence. The *Jet* photo contrasts with “The Fedora” which portrays Till as a young, adventuresome boy who imitates other heroes (Dr. King) or movie stars (Harrison Ford as Indiana Jones); he wears the same type of hat preferred by 1920s tough guys and today's hipsters. Of course, the poem ends with bitter irony asking why Emmett didn't wear the fedora to protect him in Mississippi.

But I've included other ekphrastic poems in Till's continuing story—on his wallet, the ominous clock in front of Marshall Field's in downtown Chicago in “Searching for Emmett Till in the Loop,” the “fresh bowls, coffee cans, cigar boxes, dip jars, gun cases, cracked vases from fu-

neral homes” in “Slop Jars” about taking up collections to pay for Bryant and Milam’s legal fees. There is also an ekphrastic poem on Till’s desecrated coffin, now on display at the Smithsonian, perhaps the second most significant symbol in Till’s history. It is as iconic as the bus Rosa Parks rode the day she refused to give up her seat to a white person or the Lorraine Motel where Dr. King was shot.

JZ: You earlier mentioned the Bible and the classics as traditions you drew upon. How do Biblical allusions and references to classical mythology work in your poems about Till?

PCK: I incorporated these allusions to acknowledge the theological/mythic status of Emmett and his mother. Their tragedy received worldwide attention; Biblical allusions and parallels reinforce their universal tragedy while still anchoring their lives to African American cultural traditions. Scriptural allusions would have been a vital part of Emmett’s education and background. Biographically, Emmett was immersed in a culture where the Bible was read and adhered to, stressed in the poem on his “Grandma Alma,” seeing Mamie as the Pieta, or references to “Preacher” Moses Wright. There’s also a poem on “A Eulogy for Emmett Till to the Tune of *The Old Ship of Zion*,” one of the most celebrated songs in the African American Gospel music tradition. Attempting to capture both the erotic and the salvific, the poem on his fictional sister comes right out of the *Song of Songs*. But in “The Train to Nain,” Mamie, unlike the Biblical widow, does not see her son return from the dead. Here’s the poem:

The Train to Nain

after *Luke 7:11–17*

The day the news came from
Mississippi, all Mamie could think about
was boarding a train for Nain,
that delightful place of green pastures
at the slope of calming hills

where children recovered from death.

She started packing her hopes,
gathering sunny clothes for Emmett;
planning to meet him there,
and put a ring on his finger
and a Psalm on his lips.

She checked the schedules
to get there in time
to fetch him back
for a homecoming feast
at the start of school.

But she couldn’t find a train
to Nain from Chicago or
from Mississippi, that sovereign state
of black terror and despair.

Nor was there a train to Nain
from Memphis, Harlem, or Los
Angeles to bring back her other sons
who waited for her unleavened hand.

Symbolically, though, Till’s death was viewed and described through a Biblical/ theological lens that did resurrect him. In fact, Mamie and many Civil Rights leaders portrayed Emmett in Christological terms—he was the sacrificial lamb who laid down his life for the welfare of his people or, as Briallen Hopper put it, “Each lynched black body became a new incarnation of Christ, an unbearable and sacred symbol of black life and overcoming.” In the poem “Emmett Till Road” a street named in his honor is transformed into a South Side Golgotha where street signs remind travelers of the message above the cross—INRI, or Jesus, King of the Jews:

Emmett Till Road

It used to be just a street
now it is a memory that raps
through five or six zip codes
three dolorosa miles long
a columbarium that stretches
from Lake Michigan to sunset

a haunting place for the city's restlessness;
his name up on street signs,
at every intersection, his medals for heroic
faith,
a soulful reminder of a crucifixion,
Emmett Till, INRI,
sanctioned by the City of Chicago
and the U.S. Post Office
and thousands of residents whose
addresses commemorate his martyrdom
on every letter, card, ad, deed, and signa-
ture;
this road that began in Gehenna, Missis-
sippi
ends when there are no more stone tears
in mothers' eyes on the South Side.

Emmett is thus emblemized as the crucified Christ whose death is acknowledged and honored by the U.S. Post Office. Ironically in "What Emmett Would Have Sung" on a Gospel radio station, he croons "*Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani*," Christ's lament on the cross. On the other hand, the poem on Carolyn Bryant tars her with Apocalyptic, or should I say Dantean, imagery.

Allusions to and parallels with classical myths also run throughout the poems. These myths touch upon many of the themes in Till's tragedy—parent/child relationships, love, prophecies, archetypical evil and retribution. "Tiresias of Tallahatchie County" is about Willie Reed, the young black sharecropper who bravely testified about what he saw and heard the night Emmett Till was tortured; "Orpheus of Burr Oak" links Till to a classical figure whose body was desecrated, but Emmett still lives long after in people's hearts and imaginations. He has been called "the boy who never died." Shades from the classical world also lurk in the "Chicago River Leads a Jazz Funeral." Incidentally, I also wove echoes of Milton's "Lycidas" into that poem.

JZ: If the wolf whistling incident occurred in Chicago, what do you think would have happened to Emmett Till?

PCK: Chicago was not Mississippi in 1955. Emmett had far more social contact with white girls there than he ever would in Jim Crow Mississippi. He attended school with white girls at McCosh Elementary, and several of them liked Emmett for being a "jokester." No wonder he bragged that he had pictures of white girls in his wallet, which only infuriated his murderers more. Chicago was far more progressive and tolerant than many other northern cities. In fact, because of the black migration north in the early part of the 20th century, and continuing through the great flood of 1927 and later, Chicago boasted a large and culturally vibrant African American community extending from the inner city to the suburbs on the far south side including Argo where Mamie and Emmett once lived. Finally, Chicago was outraged by what happened to Emmett. Both Mayor Richard J. Daley and Governor William Stratton wrote strong protest letters to Mississippi's Governor Hugh L. White decrying the miscarriage of justice at the trial and accusing Mississippi of a heinous crime.

JZ: Do you have plans to do further work on Emmett Till?

PCK: Yes, this year and next several teleplays and films about Emmett are scheduled to air. I plan on writing a long essay on how closely these media come to the historical truth about what happened to Emmett Till and our country.

JZ: Have you been writing poems on Emmett Till since the publication of your book in 2015?

PCK: Yes, quite a few in fact.

JZ: Would you share one or two with us?

PCK: Yes, following is a new poem I wrote about Emmett's endless funerals and another poem about the murder of so many children in Emmett's Chicago and that was recently posted on *portside.org*.

Emmett Will Never Say Farewell

by Philip C. Kolin

Nothing ever happened once to me.
I was murdered several times before
my body was sunk in the Tallahatchie,
first ripped open by fists after fists
after fists, and then soaked with bullets;
the one that blew off part of
my head has exploded many times since
inside black boys and men.
Each bullet felt like it went straight through
me again.

I have had more funerals than
any lynched black boy could ever boast.
There was the secret one in that hooded Delta night,
thick with mosquitoes and tobacco juice curses,
before the train took me back to Chicago in 1955
for the funeral at Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ
with its waves of overcrowded tears and sobs
and then one more after the FBI got through with
me in 2005. I had still another at Roberts Temple Church
in 2009. But I will never say a final farewell
as long as the Smithsonian hosts my wake.
I have a funeral every time someone visits me there.
My casket will always be open.
That was a stipulation of my mother's will
when she left me to America.

My gashed head in the *Jet* photo
still wails as a part of America's heritage
of hate. I'm dead sure it will soon hang
in the National Gallery of Art
for generations to hear my tears.
When they brought the Statue of Liberty
to see me, she nearly collapsed.

Chicago Columbaria

by Philip C. Kolin

An epidemic of bullets
on the South Side, children

being shot or shot at.
These sons and daughters of color

fade into stiff shadows,
laid out on cold porcelain slabs.

Chicago columbaria,
morgue capital

of a nation at war with itself.
Streets lit with red and blue

whirling lights; sirens keening
obituaries every hour.

Firefighters and cops
death's new midwives,

deliver this generation of woes
on broken gurneys to the embalmers,

their only memorial a name
on a cross carried by parents,

walking tombstones
in this *Urban Dolorosa*.

Chicago, city of childless mothers.
Christ weeps under the L

for all those women whose
breasts will never again nurse a child,

for the birth canal has become
the gateway to death's scroll. ▲▼▲

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